

Section 2

BACKGROUND ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ABDUL-KARIM SADIK



Sustainable development is a very old concept whose origin can be traced back to centuries ago, but it emerged and evolved within the United Nations (UN) system in the latter half of the 20th century through a series of summits, conferences, and commissions between 1972 and 2015. These initiatives were the precursors, which paved the way for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN General Assembly in September 2015.

A. THE STOCKHOLM CONFERENCE: 1972

The UN Conference on the Human Environment, also known as the “Stockholm Conference”, held in Stockholm in 1972 was the first major international event that created considerable momentum for the recognition of sustainability at the global level, and led to the establishment of the UN Environment Program (UNEP). Since then, UNEP has been pursuing its mission: “To provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations” (UNEP).

The Conference adopted the “Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment”, which increased awareness of environmental issues worldwide through a set of forward-looking principles, such as principle 3: “The capacity of the earth to produce vital renewable resources must be maintained and, whenever practicable, restored or improved” (UN, 1972).

Despite its widespread popularity the Stockholm Declaration, with fragmented principles arrived at through compromise between different views and interests, did not strike a balance between the economic, social, and environmental issues of development, nor their interlinkages. As pointed out by Sohn, “the text [of the declaration] finally patched together from bits and pieces of various drafts does not show any real coherence of form or any uniform way of treating substance” (Sohn, 1973).

Following the Stockholm Declaration, development continued to be primarily equated with national economic growth in both developed and developing countries. This approach hampered the uptake of sustainable development

and posed an imminent threat to the exhaustion of natural resources “whether in terms of supply, [e.g. oil reserves] or quality [e.g., air or water pollution]” (Drexhage and Murphy, 2010).

B. THE BRUNDTLAND REPORT: 1987

“Concerned about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development”, the UN General Assembly established in 1983 the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), “to make available a report on environment and the global problematique to the year 2000 and beyond, including proposed strategies for sustainable development” (UN, 1987). Four years later, in 1987, the WCED published its report entitled “Our Common

TABLE 1

THE EIGHT MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

| | |
|---------------|--|
| GOAL 1 | Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger |
| GOAL 2 | Achieve universal primary education |
| GOAL 3 | Promote gender equality and empower women |
| GOAL 4 | Reduce child mortality |
| GOAL 5 | Improve maternal health |
| GOAL 6 | Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases |
| GOAL 7 | Ensure environmental sustainability |
| GOAL 8 | Develop a global partnership for development |

Source: UN, 2015.

Future”, also known as the “Brundtland Report” after the name of the Commission’s chairman, the Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland.

In its deliberations on new approaches to environment and development, the Commission recognized that “development cannot subsist upon a deteriorating environmental resources base; the environment cannot be protected when growth does not take into account the cost of environmental destruction. Fragmented institutions and policies cannot treat these problems separately. They are linked in a complex system of cause and effect” (WCED, 1987). Such a perspective, and others in the same vein expounded by the Commission underscored the synthesis of its most commonly adopted

definition of sustainable development, as an alternative approach to the narrow paradigm based on economic growth. Sustainable development is that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987).

The “Brundtland Report” popularized the concept of sustainable development and created further momentum towards the institutionalization of sustainable development and the adoption of a plan of action for its implementation.

C. RIO SUMMIT (EARTH SUMMIT): 1992

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the “Earth Summit” was held in Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil in June 1992. It was a landmark event, in terms of the number of participating stakeholders and the broad scope of its Agenda 21, incorporating a global plan of action for sustainable development.

The Rio Declaration, containing 27 principles, emphasized the implementation of national and global decisions to preserve the health of the planet and the integrity of its natural resources for the wellbeing of present and future generations. Principle 4 states: “In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it” (Rio Declaration, 1992). In its Summary of the Special Session, held in June 1997 to review the implementation of Agenda 21, the UN General Assembly (UNGASS) acknowledged a number of positive results and some progress made in certain areas, but at the same time it expressed deep concern “that the overall trends for sustainable development are worse today than they were in 1992” (IISD, 1997). Furthermore, the UNGASS recognized the continued deterioration of the global environment as noted in the UNEP’s Global Environment Outlook report. It pointed out that “increasing levels of pollution threaten to exceed the capacity of the global environment to absorb them, increasing the potential obstacles to economic and social development in developing countries” (IISD, 1997).

The Rio Summit succeeded in forging a political standpoint through the active engagement and participation of almost all world leaders in its deliberations. However, much remains to be done for the implementation of the goals set out under Agenda 21. This unfolding outcome of the Rio Summit prompted an unending quest for sustainable development through a set of specific goals and targets to be achieved over a time-bound period, an endeavor by the UN, which gave birth to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2000.

D. THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: 2000

With a background of too little implementation of the goals in Agenda 21 of the Rio Summit, and persistent poverty and hunger at an unacceptable level, the international community launched the Millennium Summit in September 2000 to chart a vision to eradicate extreme poverty and address other various issues hampering the progress of sustainable development.

The Summit’s vision was shaped by what has become the “Millennium Declaration”, embracing eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), accompanied by a set of targets and indicators to monitor the progress of their implementation. The MDGs are described in Table 1.

It is to be recalled that the Rio +5 Summit in 1997 created the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to review and monitor progress towards Agenda 21 every five years, including a review of the financial resources available for implementation. On the means of implementation, Agenda 21 noted that in addition to Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a main source of external funding, substantial new and additional financial resources were required for sustainable development and implementation of Agenda 21. However, two years following the adoption of the MDGs, the International Conference on Financing for Development, also known as “Monterrey Consensus” was held in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002 to address the challenges of financing for development around the world, particularly in developing countries (UN, 2003). The conference noted with concern the dramatic

shortfalls in the currently estimated resources required to implement the internationally agreed development goals, including the MDGs. With the passage of time, growing concern about lack of progress on environmental issues, shortfalls in the resources required to implement the action plan under Agenda 21, and the unlikely prospects for the achievement of the MDGs in 2015, prompted the UN to call for a new conference to consider the evolving challenges.

E. THE RIO+20 CONFERENCE: 2012

Considering the progress made on agreed goals as enshrined in previous declarations, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), was held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the conference in Rio in 1992. In Rio +20, member states reached an agreement to launch a process to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) that build upon the MDGs, and that are limited in number, aspirational, easy to communicate, and address in a balanced way the three dimensions of sustainable development.

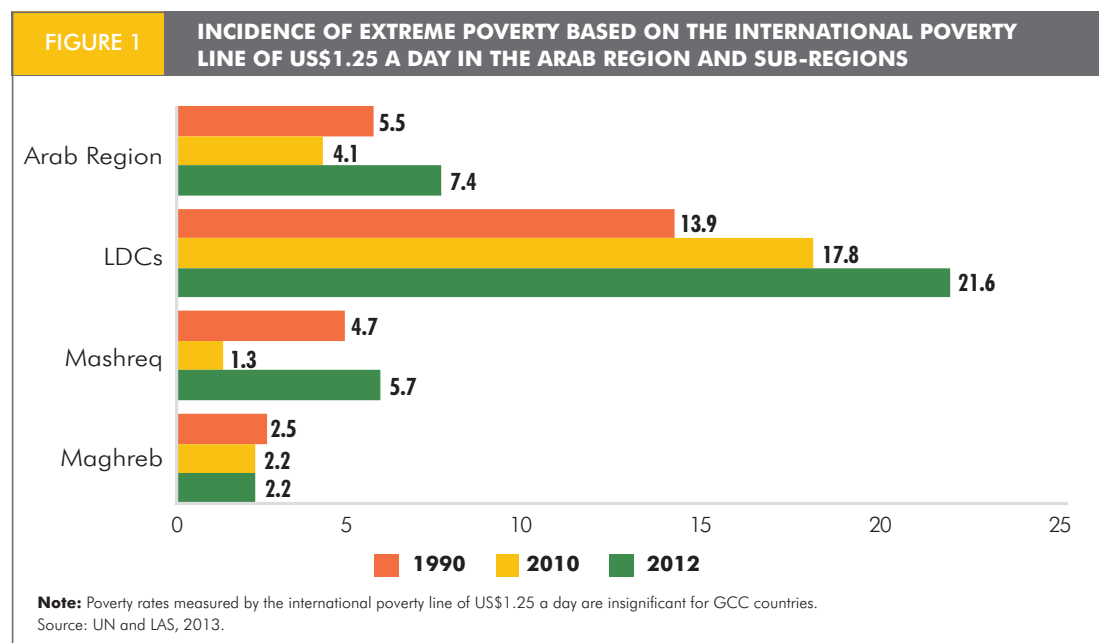
In its Annex, the outcome document of Rio+20 entitled “The future we want” contains 283 statements, including the vision of the conference. It reaffirmed the Rio principles and past action plans and developed a comprehensive framework

for action and follow-up on thematic areas and cross-sectoral issues to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, to address the themes of a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, as well as expressing commitment to address the shortfalls in the implementation of action plans of the major summits on sustainable development (UN, 2012).

The conference recognized the approaching expiry target date in 2015 for the MDGs and their uneven progress in reducing poverty across regions, and the continued increase in the number of people living in poverty, especially in the least developed countries, and particularly in Africa. The need for a new development paradigm to fill the gaps and address the shortcomings identified in previous action plans, and build upon commitments already made, enhanced consensus in the conference for initiating a process for sustainable development goals, integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions.

F. THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: 2015

The Rio+20 document called for the establishment of an Open Working Group (OWG) to develop a set of SDGs that should be “action-oriented, concise and easy to



communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities” (UN 2012).

An Open Working Group (OWG), with 30 members of the UN General Assembly was established in January 2013, and was mandated to decide on its methods of work, including modalities for the full representation of relevant stakeholders and expertise in order for the SDGs to be more inclusive and developed on the basis of a diversity of perspectives and experience.

Through a series of meetings between 2013 and 2014, and input from practically all walks of life, including representatives from developed and developing countries, international organizations, expert groups, the private sector, and NGOs, the OWG concluded its task and submitted its proposal on the SDGs, which were adopted by the UN Summit in September 2015 within the framework of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The 17 SDGs, accompanied by 169 targets, are described in the Annex of the report. These goals are comprehensive, ambitious, and wider in scope than the MDGs, whose progress and outcome will help in shaping the road for the implementation of the SDGs as stipulated in “Transforming Our World – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. They, inter alia, reaffirm in goal 13 the “urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”, while “acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change” (Annex).

To combat the negative consequences of climate change and its most dangerous impact of rising global temperatures, the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris reached an agreement in December 2015 to limit global temperature rise to below 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

This agreement is critically important for the achievement of the SDGs, because of its intertwined links with them. “A strong climate agreement backed by action on the ground will

help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty, build stronger economies and safer, healthier, and more livable societies everywhere. There are 12 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that directly involve taking action on climate change in addition to climate change having its own goal” (UN, Sustainable Development Goals).

G. THE SDGs AND ARAB COUNTRIES

The SDGs are the successor to the MDGs, and will build on the progress made towards the latter. Not only this, but the level of progress related to the MDGs will shape the road to the SDGs, in terms of both the scope of the agenda to be implemented and the required resources for its implementation.

The fourth and last progress report² on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the Arab region³ was released in 2013, two years prior to the 2015 MDGs deadline. It considered progress made on the MDGs between 1990 and 2012. It shows that: “The Arab region has made impressive progress towards some MDGs. But achievements are uneven. The region lags behind on some important targets, particularly those related to combating hunger. Political, social and economic transitions since 2010 have had significant impacts including halting or reversing MDG gains in some countries of the region.



Least developed countries (LDCs) remain behind on many fronts” (UN and LAS, 2013).

Extreme poverty in the Arab region declined considerably from 5.5 percent in 1990 to 4.1 percent in 2010, but this ratio re-bounced again to reach 7.4 percent in 2012, as shown in Figure 1.

Based on the estimated percentages in Figure 1, the number of people under extreme poverty and hunger increased from about 12 million in 1990 to about 27 million in 2012. While the Arab countries were making significant strides in reducing poverty, the trend of progress in some countries was reversed due to political transition and conflicts. For example, a decade (1997-2007) of progress in Syria was wiped out as a result of the conflict. Extreme poverty in Syria was estimated at 7.9 percent in 1997 and fell to 0.3 percent in 2007, but rose again to 7.2 percent in 2012-2013 (UN and LAS, 2013).

The Arab countries are committed to the SDGs against a backdrop of inadequate progress towards the MDGs, on-going conflicts, and political

instability in some countries. “Development in the Arab region cannot be addressed separately from regional realities. With the continued Israeli occupation of Palestine, the region is suffering from the only remaining occupation in modern history. Conflicts and instability in the Arab region continue to take their toll on economic, social and political life” (UN and LAS, 2013).

Boosting the prospects of making steady progress towards the SDGs in the Arab countries will depend largely, inter alia, on adopting national development strategies with full recognition of the inseparable links between the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, including giving due consideration to unlocking the developmental benefits of cooperation and regional integration. Arab conflict countries, however, need to exert extraordinary concentrated efforts for peace building and restoration of political stability in order to establish a post-conflict environment conducive to the implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs.

